Roundtable Discussion: “U.S. Asia Policy and Its Challenge to China”
Critical Issues Seminar Series: Summary of Talk
Wednesday, October 23, 2013

This week the Critical Issues seminar series hosted a roundtable discussion on “U.S. Asia Policy and Its Challenges to China.” Presenters Ambassador Karl Eikenberry, Professor Taylor Fravel, and Professor Ezra Vogel discussed the policy background behind the U.S. re-balancing strategy in East Asia as well as the strategic context in which it was received in China. U.S. involvement in recent Chinese territorial disputes in the Pacific as well as growing nationalism and military buildup in Japan conditioned the primarily negative Chinese response to the doctrine. Ultimately, the presenters suggested that all sides will need to engage in careful diplomacy to avoid future polarization.

Ambassador Karl Eikenberry

Karl Eikenberry suggested that in discussions of the re-balancing strategy, the defense part has received the most attention, but it was only one part of a broader set of comprehensive changes. The re-balancing strategy, furthermore, was part of the larger January 2012 U.S. Defense Strategic Guidance, which highlighted the U.S.’s global strategy and in which the Asia-Pacific portion was important but not dominant. Unlike other regions, however, there will be no reduction in U.S. defensive capabilities in the Asia-Pacific. U.S. capabilities will be maintained, but not expanded upon.

With the force reductions in other regions, the re-balancing strategy will shift Navy capabilities for the first time since the Second World War way from the Atlantic to the Pacific, with 60% delegated to the Pacific, 40% to the Atlantic. There will be qualitative improvements to the U.S. air force in the region and, in anticipation of the reduction of U.S. forces in Japan, a buildup of infrastructure in Guam. The strategy also emphasizes solidifying U.S. alliances and partnerships in the region as well as military to military dialog, especially between the PLA and U.S. military. Most of these elements of the re-balancing strategy were not novel and a long time in building.

Despite being a small part of the larger re-balancing strategy or “pivot,” the military component of the strategy received the most attention in the United States and in China. U.S. leadership emphasized the defense component to signal the shift in U.S. strategic interests away from Afghanistan and Iraq and as a response to concerns over Chinese interference with U.S. ships in its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) as well as a more aggressive PRC posture in asserting its maritime sovereignty claims. The Chinese, in turn, saw the policy as a containment strategy. The Chinese reaction can be contextualized within the U.S.’s long-standing presence in the Pacific – a policy that the Chinese view as having consequences for their security strategy. Despite this negative response to the strategy, however, there has no been a direct impact on PLA modernization, which has continued apace but remained largely subordinate to economic modernization.

Professor Taylor Fravel

Taylor Fravel turned the conversation to the role of China’s territorial disputes in the pivot controversy. The regional context for the pivot was the intensification of
territorial and maritime disputes involving China, which started around 2008. Whether or not the pivot’s intended target was China, recent U.S. attention to and focus on China’s territorial disputes was viewed as threatening by China. The United States doesn’t have territorial or maritime claims in the South China Sea and East China Sea, but some U.S. allies are engaged in such disputes with China. The U.S. has adopted a position of neutrality in these disputes, but has been increasingly active by stating its interests in the peaceful settlement of these disputes and underscoring its commitment to its allies in these disputes. All of this contributed to the difficult political context in which the pivot was received.

A second important context of the pivot is the broader trend of China as a rising power and the United States as a dominant power in the region. Whenever such power balances are shifting, spirals of instability in the region becomes a concern. Power dynamics become supercharged in territorial disputes in particular because every state involved feels as though they are defending their rightful claim. When the U.S. enters such disputes, it is viewed as tacking sides even while stating its neutrality. These changing power dynamics and U.S. attention to territorial and maritime disputes created a subtext of anxiety and concern over the curbing of Chinese interests by future U.S. involvement in the region.

In addition to providing the context that ensured the negative reception of the pivot on China, these issues could also lead to future polarization in the region. Recent events such as the Senkaku Island controversy represent this trend. The territorial dimension of these disputes will require careful diplomacy from all sides.

Professor Ezra Vogel

The context of the pivot's reception was also shaped by the Japanese military buildup. China is growing increasingly concerned over what they perceive as rising nationalism and militarism in Japan. The Japanese are quietly building on their armed forces, adopting high technology from successful industries, building on an already strong Navy, and playing a broader role in global issues. This growing military might has been coupled with recent shows of nationalism, including the Japanese government’s purchase of the Senkaku Islands and the election of nationalistic Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. China has interpreted all of these events through a lens of revival of militarism. The issues and fears raised by the pivot strengthened these concerns.

Japan’s decision to strengthen its military may be a reaction its fears over long-term U.S. retreat from the region and growing Chinese assertiveness. Japanese officials, like their counterparts in other countries, wonder whether the United States in ten years will have the economic resources to continue to fund the pivot. In addition, Japanese observe that many Chinese patriots, concerned with the history of past humiliations, are buoyed by their economic success in surpassing Japan. Chinese assertiveness and criticisms of Japan’s growing militarism only increase the trends in Japan that Chinese say they would like to prevent.